

## Popular weed killer pulled

Herbicide/fertilizer pellets blamed for contaminating rivers, killing birds

**Jamie Hall and Keith Gerein, with files from Sarah**

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EDMONTON - The province's decision to ban weed-and-feed style products will force homeowners to take a more environmentally friendly approach to lawn care, garden centre operators say.

"There will be some initial panic, especially from people who have relied on good old weed-and-feed, and are used to just throwing pellets on their lawn every spring, but after a little education, I don't see it being a big problem at all," Greenland Garden Centre manager Tina Burbach said.

The province announced Thursday it will ban the sale of granular-type lawn-care products that combine herbicide and fertilizer, known generically as weed-and-feed, on Jan 1, 2010.

Environment Department officials said the chemical 2, 4-D used in these combination products is "very mobile," and regularly turns up in water downstream from urban areas.

"This is a simple measure that Albertans can take to curb the amount of chemicals entering our water," Environment Minister Rob Renner said.

The pellets, or prills, as they're called, are popular with many gardeners because of their convenience. They feed the lawn and eliminate weeds at the same time.

The problem is with the application, or, in this case, the over-application.

More than 10 times the required amount of herbicide can be strewn on lawns, with the excess eventually running into storm drains, then ending up in creeks and rivers.

Products intended for spot application to kill weeds will still be sold to consumers.

Cherry Dodd, an environmental advocate with Pesticide Free Edmonton, said she has been waiting for such a ban.



CREDIT: Ed Kaiser/Edmonton Journal  
Jim Hole at Hole's Garden Centre posing with a bag of weed and feed which will soon be banned. In back on the shelf are items that likely will not be banned.

She said Alberta Environment deserves credit for recognizing the dangers of the weed-and-feed products.

Dodd said the granules are also a danger to birds, which mistake them for pieces of grit used help them grind up their food. "The birds ingest them and then they become poisoned."

She said her group would prefer to see all pesticides banned in Edmonton, but getting rid of the lawn pellets is a good start.

"They're the worst," she said. "This is a very important step."

Linda Hall, a herbicide scholar at the University of Alberta, said 2,4-D is much more effective and safe when it is sprayed, rather than spread on the grass in pellet form.

The man-made chemical "isn't terribly toxic, but anything in the water we can prevent is a good idea," she said

Hall said fertilizer used by itself can make the lawn stronger and more competitive against weeds. Then, if a herbicide is needed, spot spraying is the way to go.

Some estimates suggest 180 times more herbicide is used with a treatment of granules compared with spot-spraying, she said.

"A little squirt on the dandelions is a much smarter way to do this. It's much more effective and much safer for the environment."

Jim Hole of Hole's Garden Centre sells "quite a few tonnes" of weed-and-feed products every year, but said the ban wouldn't have a significant impact on his financial bottom line.

"Even if it did, it wouldn't matter," said Hole, "because (banning) it is the right thing to do."

Burback said many garden centres, Greenland and Hole's among them, long ago sought alternative products, with a view to minimizing the use of chemicals.

Burback said Greenland carries a variety of organic fertilizers and organic herbicides, and last year introduced a product called corn gluten, which attacks the seedlings of weeds, yet feeds the lawn.

"We've received a lot of positive feedback from customers," she said.

Hole said that 10 years ago, 60 to 70 per cent of his customers would buy weed-and-feed because of its ease and simplicity.

"Over the past few years, though, there's slowly been this understanding by people that they need to make sure their lawn is vigorous and strong and can stand the invasion of weeds, so that you only need to spot-treat it," Hole said.

The right soil, high-quality grass seed, proper irrigation and a correct mowing height are all factors which contribute to a healthy lawn, he added.

Doug Kirchner, director of operations for Edmonton's parks branch, said the provincial ban is something the city and other communities have lobbied for since 2005.

"We don't use the product at all, simply because we clearly know what it does and how harmful it can be," he said.

Liberal MLA David Swann, a doctor who worked in the public health field, welcomed the government's decision.

"To put the public well-being ahead of individual rights is a big step for this government," he said.

Edmonton bylaw enforcement officer Ryan Pleckaitis doesn't think the ban will necessarily increase his workload.

As it is, Pleckaitis and his staff of five responded to more than 5,000 complaints between May and October.

Their job is to enforce the weed control act, which is designed to control the spread of noxious and restricted weeds within city boundaries, in residential neighbourhoods and on commercial and industrial properties.

"We always recommend to people that they cut the weeds down; it's the most esthetically pleasing," Pleckaitis said.

Larry Radomske, owner of Green Drop in Edmonton, said he supports the province's ban.

"Pesticides get a bad rap sometimes, but they are safe when used properly, mixed properly and applied properly," he said. "My feeling is that homeowners don't necessarily use it properly ... so this gets it out of homeowners' hands."

He said some municipalities in Canada have been moving to ban the use of weed-and-feed, but those bylaws aren't as powerful as provincewide legislation that can actually stop people from buying the product.

The Alberta ban won't affect his company, because it doesn't use combination products. His lawn-care staff use both herbicides and fertilizers, but not together at the same time, he said.

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